

Susanna Siegel, *The Contents of Visual Experience*  
Replies to Campbell, Dretske and Block. 6 April 2012.

**Rich Content View:** Some visual experiences have Rich contents.

**Content View:** All visual perceptual experiences have contents.

**Method of phenomenal contrast** = my way of arguing for the Rich Content View.

The Content View plays an instrumental role, since the main issue behind the Rich Content View can be raised without it.

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### **Reply to Campbell**

A way to challenge the Content View: find a visual perceptual experience that doesn't have any contents.

Conveying constraint on contents of experience: contents are conveyed to the subject.

Contents are conveyed, by being available for at least one of three functions:

- belief-formation
- guiding actions
- introspection

To be conveyed is to be *accessible* (=available) in any of these ways.

**Nutshell version** of my argument for the Content View:

All visual perceptual experiences present properties as being instantiated, and contents can be derived from those properties.

**Campbell's objection** to the Content View (and my argument for it):

Some creatures as a matter of course consciously experience properties that are not conveyed to them. His examples:

- Tiger in veldt: visually distinguishes prey by seeing its color contrast with the surrounding foliage.
- Child passes the Ishihara color test: sees the '5' by seeing the color contrast between the dots that form the numeral and the dots surrounding it.

Campbell: The tiger "does not form beliefs about the colors of things, it does not use color to guide its actions, and it does not form introspective beliefs about what color experiences it is having."

**Campbell's assumption:** tiger is experiencing color, not unconsciously perceiving it.

- If its differentiation were unconscious, like a blindsighter's, then the case wouldn't pose any challenge to the Content View.

**Reply:** These cases don't illustrate properties that are experienced without being conveyed.

Introspection is probably out of the question for the tiger. Perhaps belief is too, depending on what beliefs are. But guiding action? Tiger can't sort things by color, but:

- Given the role of color in enabling the tiger to distinguish the prey from its foliage, its color experience guides its pursuit of the prey.
  - Given its drive to hunt, the tiger pursues the prey, in part because it can see it, and by hypothesis, the tiger can see its prey, only because that animal's color looks different to the tiger from the color of the animal's surroundings.
- Child indicates that she sees the '5', because she is cooperating in taking the test, and because the '5' looks to her to have a different color from its surroundings.
  - Her color experience is guiding her report (a form of behavior).
- Tiger or Child would have to be suffering a pathology if its color experience couldn't any way to guide its behavior.
  - Perhaps in some pathological cases, a tiger sees the color contrast between prey and foliage, but can't act on the basis the spatial differentiation that its color experience underwrites. But Campbell would presumably not want to base his case against the Content View on pathological cases.

So far, I've focused on Campbell's examples. But Campbell thinks the general phenomenon that the examples are meant to illustrate is predicted by Huang and Pashler's distinction between roles for properties in visual perception:

**Selection:** A property F of an object or region o plays a selective role, just in case the perceiver uses F to distinguish o from its surroundings.

**Access:** The access role is "the way in which properties of objects seen are 'conveyed' or 'accessed' by the subject".

**Campbell's reasoning** against the Content View:

- (i) If a property figures in phenomenal character, then it can play a selective role.
- (ii) A property can play a selective role without being accessed.
- (iii) If a property is conveyed, then it is accessed.

**Conclusion:** (iv) A property can figure in phenomenal character, without being conveyed.

In my argument for the Content View (the Argument from Appearing), being conveyed is a stepping stone on the path from properties figuring in phenomenal character, to experiences having content. If Campbell's conclusion (iv) is true, then this stepping stone is removed, and the path my argument depends on is blocked.

More importantly, conclusion (iv) would support the priority of phenomenal character over representation – the key junction at which Campbell's positive picture clashes with the Content View.

**Temporal priority:** experience of properties **occurs before** properties are conveyed.

**Explanatory priority:** experience of properties **explains how** properties come to be conveyed.

“The trouble with representationalist accounts of perception is that they collapse **the basic level of sensory experience** into the higher-level, purely cognitive **stage** at which the properties of objects are explicitly accessed.”

“The accessing of a property by the perceiver may indeed be a matter of representational content, but the figuring of a property in visual experience is **more basic** than its being accessed by the perceiver; ‘conveyed’ in Siegel’s term”.

Q: Is conclusion (iv) shown to be true by Campbell's reasoning?

Conclusion (iv): A property can figure in phenomenal character, without being conveyed.

A: Since the conveying constraint is formulated in terms of availability rather than actual access, premise (iii) in the reasoning above is false.

Premise (iii): If a property is conveyed, then it is accessed.

Since premise (iii) is false, Campbell's reasoning does not support either of the priority theses, at given my notion of contents.

- Evidence that selection occurs before actual access would not thereby be evidence that selection occurs before accessibility, or therefore before the conveying constraint is met.
  - It would therefore not support the priority of phenomenal character over representation.

**Another possible strategy:** To defend the priority of phenomenal character of representation, a natural strategy would be to try and tie content to actual access, while divorcing phenomenal character from actual access.

- An experience could come to have accuracy conditions, only by being accessed.
- But an experience can have phenomenal character without actually being accessed.

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### Reply to Dretske

Dretske's main challenge to the Rich Content View: The only reasonable reaction for Expert to Novice's painting is Just Right. How can Novice's painting be Just Right for Expert, on the assumption that Expert's experience represents pine-tree-ness?

Answer: Just as the same tree can (phenomenally) look different to different perceivers, so too can the same painting of a tree. Expert can experience Novice's painting as depicting a pine tree, even if Novice doesn't.

What [Expert] sees when he looks at my painting is what he sees when he looks at the tree: *pine-tree-ness*. ... My painting is just right to Expert who sees *pine-tree-ness* in both the pine-trees and the painting.

Dretske thinks if I agree with this much, then I'll stop short of the Rich Content View.

"If option #3 [Just Right] is the way we are forced to think about the forester's visual experience, it means that I always unintentionally include in my painting of a pine tree properties (*pine-tree-ness*) I don't see in the tree I'm painting. ...[and if I do that, then] it sounds like *pine-tree-ness* is really just a particular arrangement of colors and shapes."

### Reductio by depiction

Assumption for reductio: Expert's experience represents pine-tree-ness.

Premise 1: Novice's painting is Just Right for Expert.

Conclusion 1: Expert veridically experiences Novice's painting as depicting a pine tree.

Conclusion 2: It is sufficient to represent pine-tree-ness in experience, for experience represent a (non-K) shape-gestalt that goes with pine trees.

Conclusion 3: Pine-tree-ness just is a shape-gestalt.

- Conclusion 3 is absurd, and conclusion 2 contradicts the assumption for reductio.

Q: How could we get from the reasonable Conclusion 1 to the problematic Conclusions 2 and 3?

**Auxiliary Assumption:** If you experience a painting as depicting F, then you experience the canvas as having either F, or a two-dimensional analogue of F.

Experienced depiction = experienced *basic* depiction.

### Basic vs derivative depiction

A property F is basically depicted (in a painting), iff F is a property of (part of) the canvas (e.g., color, shape, texture, relative location) or the canvas has a “two-dimensional analogue” of F. --Compare to the sense-datum inference.

A property F is derivatively depicted (in a painting), iff F is depicted in the painting but is not basically depicted.

### **The Auxiliary Assumption in action**

In discussing how the Just Right option could combine with the Rich Content View, Dretske says Expert suffers an illusion when looking at Novice’s painting.

“My experience [= Novice’s] of the painting... is veridical. It represents what I see (the canvas surface) as an arrangement of various colors, shapes and textures-- colors, shapes, and textures that make the image on the canvas look the way pine trees look. Since the canvas surface does have two-dimensional analogues of these colors, shapes, and textures my experience of the canvas is veridical. [Expert’s] experience, on the other hand, is not veridical—at least not completely so. He knows the painting is not a pine tree, of course, but he nonetheless experiences it [SS: = the painting] as having a property it lacks.”

Why would the Expert experience *the canvas* as having the property of being a pine-tree (on the assumption that RCV is true)? --Because by hypothesis,

- Expert’s experience of the pine tree represents pine-tree-ness.
- Novice’s painting is Just Right at capturing Expert’s experience of the pine tree.

...So Expert must experience the painting as depicting pine-tree-ness.

But why does Expert’s experiencing the painting as depicting pine-tree-ness entail that he attributes pine-tree-ness to the canvas?

--This could only be because Dretske thinks that to experience a painting as depicting F is to experience it as basically depicting F -- which is the Auxiliary Assumption. (And the reason Expert has an illusion is because there is no two-dimensional analogue of pine-tree-ness).

### **Reductio by depiction**

Assumption for reductio: Expert’s experience represents pine-tree-ness.

Premise 1: Novice’s painting is Just Right for Expert.

Conclusion 1: Expert veridically experiences Novice’s painting as depicting a pine tree.

Premise 2 = **Auxiliary assumption + veridicality**: Expert veridically experiences Novice’s painting as *basically* depicting a pine tree.

I.e., Expert veridically experiences Novice’s painting as having either pine-tree-ness, or a two-dimensional analogue of F.

By Premise 2, Novice's painting basically depicts pine-tree-ness. By Premise 1, the painting depicts all the properties that Expert experiences when he sees the tree.

Conclusion 2: It is sufficient to represent pine-tree-ness in experience, for experience to represent a (non-K) shape-gestalt that goes with pine trees.

Conclusion 3: Pine-tree-ness just is a shape-gestalt.

Conclusions 2 and 3 wouldn't follow from the premises, without the Auxiliary assumption.

**Reply:** The Auxiliary assumption is false. Expert could veridically experience Novice's painting as depicting a pine tree, without his experience attributing pine-tree-ness to the *painting* at all. Sometimes when we experience depiction, we experience derivative depiction.

So how can Just Right be the right answer, if Expert's experience represents pine-tree-ness? Answer: Because Expert experiences Novice's painting as derivatively depicting a pine tree, and Novice doesn't.

This answer raises some other questions.

Q1: How come Expert experiences the painting as derivatively depicting a pine tree, and Novice doesn't?

A: Because Expert has a recognitional disposition that Novice lacks.

Q2: Does Novice's painting depict a pine tree, or doesn't it?

A: Yes. Novice's painting depicts pine-tree-ness, unbeknownst to him. But Novice does not experience his painting as depicting pine-tree-ness.

Q3: But how can Novice's painting detect pine-tree-ness, if Novice made the painting and had no idea he was painting a pine tree?

A: Depiction can come apart from intended depiction.

Q4: Is depicting colors and shapes in a painting ever sufficient for depicting pine-tree-ness?

A: Yes. –But this does not tell us anything about what experience represents, or that we can only experience properties that a painting could basically depict. It would tell us those things, only if experiencing properties could be assimilated to basic depiction by a painting, on analogy with the sense-datum inference. –And the case of motion shows that we can experience properties that can't be basically depicted in a painting.

**What about the Goldilocks test?**

Goldilocks isn't useful for testing which differences in properties represented are visual differences - even if we grant (with representationalists) that by depicting properties of the tree in a painting, the painters can thereby depict their visual experience of the tree.

## I. Two problems with the Goldilocks test

### 1. The test assumes exhaustive paintability, but not all properties representable in experience are paintable.

Goldilocks test could not do its job if some features of experience were unpaintable. (E.g. If A said "Too Little!" in response to B's painting, this verdict wouldn't indicate that A sees properties B doesn't, if B's painting leaves out some properties B sees). The test depends on an assumption of exhaustive paintability of what you see.

- dynamic properties: a ball rolling along the ground from exact points A to B. (A painting might depict as ball as rolling, but where exactly did it start and where will it end? This does not seem paintable.)
- temporal properties: a ball rolling along the ground really fast and progressively slower, speeding up after a slow start.

### 2. Goldilocks piggybacks entirely on introspection.

How would you paint what you see?

Step 1: Figure out what you see: introspection.

Step 2: Apply (competent-painter's) knowledge of how to translate it onto a canvas.

Step 3: Paint.

If introspection misses anything, then there may be properties represented in experience that are not depicted in the painting.

If the test worked, then we'd have to already have introspective access to the properties represented in experience – in which case we wouldn't need the test in the first place.

## Explaining the phenomenal difference

Suppose Just Right is the only reasonable reaction of Expert to Novice's painting. What then explains the phenomenal difference between the experiences of Novice and Expert when they look at the pine tree?

Dretske's Q: "The neurological changes that occur when there are changes in cognitive dispositions is enough – isn't it? – to explain the difference in the expert's overall experience of the pine trees."

A: Yes it is enough to explain *why there is* a difference. But what we need in order to settle whether the Rich Content View is made true by this case is an explanation of *what kind of difference* in content (or phenomenal character) it is – not just an explanation of why there is any difference at all.

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### Reply to Block

Since the contrast method is a form of abduction, it operates by picking a target thesis, finding a phenomenal contrast that it should explain, and then considering alternative explanations. In applying the contrast method to potential experiences of kind properties, I divide the types of alternative explanations to the Rich Content View into two categories:

- difference in non-representational features (e.g., raw feels).
- difference in non-K contents.

I don't purport to address every version of each of these types, but I do purport to exhaust the logical space of possible explanations by dividing it into the three main options (non-representational features, non-K contents, K-contents).

- I'm speaking from within the framework of the Content View. In a Naïve Realist framework, the non-K and K options could be formulated in terms of properties that we're perceptually related to, and on the non-representational option is a phenomenal state in which one isn't presented with any properties.

Block focuses on the case of kind properties (faces and trees), and considers several types of alternative explanations of phenomenal contrasts that I don't consider. These unconsidered types of alternatives raise two natural questions:

Q1: Do these alternatives show that logical space isn't exhausted by the options above?

Q2: In the cases Block considers, are any of these alternative explanations better than the Rich Content View?

Block's three examples of unconsidered alternatives:

- **Salience-via-inhibition** in the other species/other race effect on face discrimination: compared to 6-month olds, 9-month olds are better at discriminating between individuals belonging to the race they've been most exposed to and worse at discriminating between individuals belonging to other races.

Two K-properties potentially represented by 9-month olds:

**individual** = being Bob – for same-species/race.

**group** = being a monkey – for either same- or other species/race.

- Proposal: **Salience-via-inhibition**. 6- and 9-month olds differ in which facial features they have inhibited. The leftover uninhibited features are salient. –There's no addition of K- or non K-properties, just subtraction of non-K properties.



This proposal has two elements: a selection of non-K features, and their resulting salience.

- **Figure/ground distinctions:** Maybe what explains the difference between experiences before and after you learn to recognize pine trees is just a difference in which non-K properties are foregrounded.
  - This difference in foreground/background structure is a difference in **figural enhancement**.
- **Family resemblances:** In the Posner paradigm, you can learn to recognize a bunch of dots as belonging to a category, even when there is no unique set of non-K properties that they have in common.
  - The difference between how the dot-displays look before and after you learn the category is a difference in **family resemblance**.

On Q1: No, logical space isn't any bigger. (a) Family resemblance is a representational option – the only question is whether it's K or non-K. (b) Changes in salience via inhibition are at least partly representational (different non-K properties). (c) If salience itself is non-representational, then the salience option is a combination of non-K and non-representational options. (d) All three options apply to figural enhancement: non-K, non-representational, and mixed.

On Q2: I think “salience”, “figural enhancement” and “family resemblance” are under-described. In one guise, the family resemblance option entails the Rich Content View:

- Dot-displays represented as belonging-to-family-K → **Rich Content View**.

### **Non-K options**

Differences explained by **figural enhancement**:

- Figure-ground: Expert's experience upon seeing pine trees has different figural enhancement than Novice's experience upon seeing pine trees = **mixed option or non-K option**

**Problem:** Unlikely that differential figural enhancement is the whole story, since Expert and Novice can both make discriminations as to where individual trees begin and end.

Differences explained by **salience of non-K features via inhibition**

- Only the facial features that trigger recognition (either of individuals or groups) are represented, other facial features are inhibited. = **non-K option**

**Problem:** But we still represent nose-gestalt, mouth-gestalt, other features shared by all faces. Ditto for features common to pine trees and other trees.

- Features that trigger recognition are represented in the foreground, whereas facial features that don't trigger recognition are represented in the background, or not at all.

Depending on what foregrounding and backgrounding come to, these options will be either non-K, non-representational, or mixed:

- foregrounded features are represented with more specificity, backgrounded features with less specificity = **non-K option**
- foregrounded features are mentally-painted with familiarity-paint, backgrounded features are not = **non-representational option**
- both, or mix-and-match

**Problems for non-representational option:** (a) What's familiarity paint?

(b) Since you recognize group/species without recognizing an individual, at least two varieties of familiarity paint are needed. Either it is just an explanatorily primitive fact that one kind of familiarity paint is for the group, and another kind is for individuals, or else there is covert appeal to K-properties.

**Problem for the non-K option:** The proposal has to be taken as a pro-tanto proposal about which features are salient and which aren't, since many factors will determine which features of a face are salient (whether there's a distracting scar, a weird contortion, funny makeup, how you're oriented to the face, voluntary attention to razor bumps, smoothness, etc). These factors presumably can rearrange the distribution of attention to focus on features that don't trigger recognition and background features that do – yet that those redistributions do not throw us back to the phenomenal character we had before we learned to recognize the group or individual. So it seems as if salience-via-inhibition can't be the full story.

Differences explained by **family resemblance**:

- Faces (/trees) represented as “having a family resemblance cluster” of non-K properties.

Non-K Challenge: There have to be family resemblance clusters of colors, shapes, etc. that are coextensive with doubtful faces to the extent that we recognize them as doubtful. –But then how can we rule them out as alternatives to doubtfulness?

Block's answer favoring K: We don't perceptually adapt to family resemblance clusters, but we do to emotion (and gender).

Reply: Thanks!

Block's methodological moral: Applying the contrast method in this case requires appealing to experimental results.

Reply: The adaptation results are helpful, but the family resemblance option has other difficulties as well.

- "Family resemblance cluster" is a misleading label for what's represented, because there isn't a single cluster of non-K properties that defines the family. Instead it's a similarity (resemblance) relationship between items (trees, faces, etc) that explains how novel instances can be recognized.

Q: How is the resemblance represented in experience?

A: A tree or face

- belongs to a family K
- resembles a range of specific other trees/faces with respect to clusters of non-K properties

**Problem:** which other trees/faces figure in the resemblance relation?

--you might not retain memories of specific pine trees, yet still could experience them differently as a result of learning to recognize them.

--the resemblance relation between items that you've never seen before, so their clusters of non-K properties couldn't be represented as related in the resemblance relation.

Upshot: It's hard to pin down the exact non-K respect of resemblance. The Rich Content version of the family resemblance proposal explains how resemblance could be represented in experience, and it's hard to see how non-K properties could play that role.

Conclusion: The Rich Content View is probably one of those positions that can be defended both without many if any experimental results (e.g., in the cases of causation and perceptual connectedness), and through abductions that use a mix of non-experimental and experimental considerations to find the best explanation of the contrast.